# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## 458 HIRING OLYMPICS AND HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURE WITH J.D. ROTH

## EPISODE SUMMARY

In this episode, **J.D. Roth**, Managing Director and co-owner of Guardian Chemicals, shares his journey as a "second-generation" leader in the water treatment industry and his philosophy that a company is really "a whole bunch of people who have decided to work together toward a common goal." He describes that goal as building a better future for communities, the environment, and especially staff, and explains how that purpose shapes hiring, culture, and leadership. The conversation centers on Guardian's innovative "Hiring Olympics" and Graduate Business Analyst (GBA) program, which use structured, multi-step interviews and case-study "Olympic days" to identify high-capacity, values-aligned talent, with strong retention and cross-department impact.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (GROUP DISCUSSION)

1. **Defining a shared purpose.** JD says there "really isn't a company, just a whole bunch of people who have decided to work together toward a common goal." How clearly is your organization's purpose defined? What's your version of building a better future for communities, the environment and staff, and how often does that purpose guide hiring or daily decisions?

2. **Balancing legacy and authenticity.** As a second-generation leader, JD wrestled with filling his father's shoes versus leading authentically. How does your team honour past successes while evolving to meet today's challenges? Where might tradition be holding you back from doing what's right for your current people and customers?

3. **Normalizing vulnerability**. JD's early memory of admitting he "had no idea" what he was doing and asking a contractor for help became a pattern of learning and relationship-building. How comfortable are you and your colleagues with openly asking for help? What could you do to create a culture where questions and growth are celebrated?

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (GROUP DISCUSSION)

4. P**ower of peer groups.** JD joined the **Rising Tide Mastermind** because he knew he couldn't run the business alone and needed a community for vulnerable sharing. Where do you get candid peer feedback on your leadership or technical challenges? How might a mastermind or accountability group accelerate your growth?

5. **Hiring for culture and competency.** Guardian's general hiring process uses a 10-minute screen, a competency interview and a two-by-two interview where two people test skills and two test core values. How does your hiring process balance technical ability with cultural fit? Who outside management could you involve improving both perspectives?

6. **Designing rotational programs.** The Graduate Business Analyst (GBA) program rotates high-potential hires through four departments over two years and assigns them cross-functional projects. How could your organization create a rotational or project-based program to develop future leaders and tackle strategic initiatives? Which departments would participants rotate through?

7. **Benefits and risks of group assessments.** During the Hiring Olympics, 10–20 candidates experience interviews and case studies side by side while observers watch their interactions. What advantages do you see in comparing candidates in a single event (e.g., efficiency, direct comparison, peer dynamics)? What challenges or biases might arise, and how could you address them?

8. **Evaluating behavior under pressure.** In collaborative case studies, candidates must make decisions with incomplete information, delegate tasks quickly and present a recommendation as a group. If you designed a case study for your context, what kinds of decisions and behaviors would you want to see (e.g., risk analysis, customer empathy, prioritization)?

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (PERSONAL REFLECTIONS)

9. **Reputation and curiosity.** JD would tell his younger self to "stay curious" and remember that "you only have one reputation—guard it with your life." How do curiosity and integrity show up in your day-to-day work? Are there areas where fear of mistakes prevents you from learning or speaking up?

10. **Leading by example**. JD reads widely—recent titles include **Fearless Pricing** and **Supercommunicators**—and he models continuous learning by sharing those insights. What are you reading or listening to right now that could help you lead better? How might you share what you learn with your team?

11. **Courageous conversations.** Collaborative case studies reward candidates who support peers and acknowledge uncertainty over those who dominate. Reflect on a recent meeting: did you make space for others to contribute and ask for clarification when needed? How might you adjust your communication style to empower teammates?

12. **Start small.** JD cautions that the Hiring Olympics isn't right for every role and suggests piloting with five or six candidates. If you're inspired to innovate your hiring or training process, what small experiment could you try in the next quarter? Who needs to be involved, and what would success look like?

## FULL EPISODE DETAILS

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## TRY THIS IN YOUR ROLE

- **Map your culture and core values.** Schedule time with your team to articulate (or revisit) your organization's purpose and core values. Document them clearly and use them as a checklist when screening applicants, evaluating performance and making strategic decisions. Encourage staff to share examples of behaviors that embody those values.

- **Pilot a mini-rotation.** Identify an emerging leader and design a three-month rotation through two departments. Assign the person a cross-functional project—such as streamlining customer onboarding or improving lab reporting—that requires collaboration and exposes them to new skills. Debrief at the end to capture lessons learned and decide whether to expand the program.

- **Run a case-study workshop.** Practice what Guardian does by hosting a small case-study session. Choose a short business scenario (e.g., evaluating the return on investing in smart sensors) and have candidates or team members work individually and then together to analyse the problem. Observe not only the solutions but also how people frame the problem, ask questions and support one another. Use the experience to refine your interview process.

- **Invest in peer coaching.** Explore joining or forming a mastermind group. Set a regular cadence to share wins, challenges and goals, and hold each other accountable. Use the group to beta-test new hiring approaches or to get feedback on your culture initiatives.

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## COMPANION RESOURCES

- AWT (Association of Water Technologies)
- Scaling UP! H2O Academy video courses
- Submit a Show Idea
- The Rising Tide Mastermind
- Entrepreneurs' Organization
- Verne Harnish 'Scaling Up'
- About Verne Harnish
- Harvard Business Review Case Studies
- 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen. R. Covey
- Fearless Pricing: Ignite Your Team, Own Your Value, and Command What You Deserve by Casey Brown
- Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection by Charles Duhigg
- Charles Duhigg — "The science behind dramatically better conversations" (TEDxManchester)
- 12 Week Year Plan
- 457 2026: A New Year with New Intentions
- Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business

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